

Elementary Classroom Libraries: The Importance of Multicultural Children's Literature

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

Emilie Carrison

Thesis Advisor

Dr. Susan Tancock

Signed

**Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana**

March 2015

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2015

INTRODUCTION

Books are key players in the elementary school classroom and the learning process in general. They can open students' eyes to a different world or a concept that is unable to be studied or seen within the general classroom. Reading is also about building knowledge and growing in understanding through connections between self, other texts, and the larger world of the reader. For these reasons, it is important that readers are able to connect with literature in order to deepen their understanding. Students connect to books in which they can see themselves, relate to content and context, and empathize with characters and environments. All students are different and approach books with diverse schema and experiences that influence how they interact with and comprehend a text. Therefore, the experience that one reader pulls from a book can be decidedly different than another. Multicultural books are books in which students of different cultures can see themselves, or books in which students are able to build and develop a respect and understanding of different cultures. Overall, multicultural literature empowers students to explore and develop empowering attitudes towards diversity and tolerance.

According to the Cooperative Children's Book Center, a non-circulating research library of the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, "All children deserve books in which they can see themselves and the world in which they live reflected. Multicultural literature belongs in every classroom and library -- on the shelves and in the hands of children, librarians, and teachers," (Cooperative Children's Book Center). For this reason, teachers need to include multicultural literature in the classroom library that allows for students to see characters and situations that are indicative of diverse cultures. Classroom libraries are often one of the main sources of reading material for elementary aged readers. For this reason, teachers should work to build a large selection of multicultural children's literature for their classroom libraries so that there are always multicultural books at their students' fingertips. When multicultural books are readily

Abstract

Quality children's literature is an imperative component of elementary literacy instruction. Students read and interact with numerous texts over their elementary career, and one of the most utilized book collections is the classroom library. Multicultural children's literature is a branch of literature that explores diverse experiences in which students of different cultures can see themselves, or books in which students are able to develop a respect and understanding of different cultures and worldviews. The dynamic connection of multicultural children's literature and the classroom library is introduced and explored in this paper. Through survey data, I analyze the perceptions of multicultural children's literature that current Indiana K-6 elementary educators hold and to what extent they include multicultural children's literature in their classroom libraries. A survey was conducted and analyzed to determine the average size of an elementary classroom library, the percentage of multicultural children's books in classroom libraries and the opinion of multicultural children's literature held by elementary teachers.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Susan Tancock for advising me throughout this Honors project and during my undergraduate career. From collaborating with me on a thesis topic, aiding in the modification of my entire project after research difficulties, guiding me through the Institutional Review Board approval process, helping me to create a digital research survey to being my biggest editor, collaborator and supporter. I greatly appreciate your advice and flexibility throughout this long process.

I would also like to thank my parents, my sisters and Drew for supporting me throughout all my academic endeavors and being there for me during both the good and the hard times! I couldn't have done it without your input and encouragement.

available for students they are more likely to choose one to read. Experts Jane M. Gangi, an associate professor of Education at Mount Saint Mary College in Newburgh, New York and Nancy Benfer, who teaches literature at the same university are avid supporters of multicultural children's literature. Gangi and Benfer explain the importance of multicultural children's literature by affirming, "Children must be able to envision possibilities for their futures. And they must fall in love with books. Culturally relevant books help children discover a passion for reading," (as cited in Strauss, 2014). Elementary teachers should make it a goal to not only equip students with the necessary skills to become a fluent a reader but to instill the love of reading and develop passionate students who grow into lifelong readers. Multicultural literature can help educators reach this goal by providing successful and struggling readers alike with authentic books that mirror their own cultures and life experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading in the Elementary Classroom

Whether students are learning to read or reading to learn educational stakeholders would agree that literacy is and should be a key focal point in the K-6 elementary school classroom. According to the 2011 Indiana K-6 State Reading Framework, "Since the ability to read is a crucial lifelong skill, providing effective reading instruction is a school's primary responsibility. Therefore, reading instruction must be central to a school's educational mission and not just in the early grades" (Indiana Department of Education, 2011, p. 2). In fact, in the state of Indiana it is mandated that ninety minutes of uninterrupted reading instruction must occur daily in elementary classrooms. In the Indiana State K-6 Reading Framework it further explains that, "In grades K-3 students should receive at least 90 minutes of uninterrupted daily reading instruction focused on the five scientifically-based components of beginning reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension," (Indiana Department of Education, 2011, p. 3). While reading

instruction in grades 4-6 affords more flexibility and can occur during specific Reading blocks as well as be integrated into different grade level content such as Social Studies or Science curriculums. Reading instruction in the upper elementary grades should, “Continue to develop foundational skills, including multisyllabic word attack strategies, skills and strategies to read informational text, and important vocabulary concepts including morphology and context usage,” (Indiana Department of Education, 2011, p. 8).

While explicit instruction in essential reading skills, strategies and vocabulary building is important other aspects of reading instruction are also valid. According to Miriam Martinez and William Teale, two educational professors at the University of Texas at San Antonio, educators of reading, “Must go beyond reading instruction that focuses only on developing abstract, isolated reading skills to a conceptualization of reading instruction that puts equal emphasis on developing readers who are skilled *and* who want to and do read” (Fractor, Martinez, Teale, & Woodruff, 1993, p. 476). Meaning, that learning the alphabetic principle, decoding strategies, syntactical cues and developing phonemic awareness is not enough on its own to create fluent readers. While readers must be proficient in these aforementioned skills, students must also learn to value reading and want to engage in it on their own time for independent learning and enjoyment.

To promote the development and continual growth of a students’ reading skills they must engage with varied levels of text that are on, below and above their respective reading levels. Students do not just learn to read through isolated exercises, but rather students require constant interaction with quality children’s literature in order to become fluent readers. During the school day students will come into contact with countless books in their classroom environment by reading selections during reading groups, listening to teacher read alouds, reading classroom selections from a Basal Reading Program, or by engaging in independent reading. No matter the format of the text the majority of reading in the elementary grades occurs in a student’s personal classroom during the

school day. For this reason the elementary classroom should be saturated with quality children's literature in a variety of genres, reading levels and subjects that draw students in and create a love and connection with reading.

The Importance of the Classroom Library

Elementary schools most often house a school library that is full of books that are just waiting for students and teachers alike to open and enjoy. Some school libraries are large and equipped with up-to-date resources of varied media formats, while others are smaller and house only the necessities. Some schools allow students to have unlimited daily access to the school library but others are not able to have this privilege. Furthermore, according to research on classroom libraries by prominent professors of education at the University of Texas at San Antonio and local elementary school teachers, not all students have access to literature collections outside of the school environment, (Fractor, et al., 1993, p. 477). International reading consultant Phyllis C. Hunter supports the claim that not all students have equal access to quality children's literature when they are not in school. In her article *Classroom Libraries: Leveling the Playing Field* Hunter states, "Classroom libraries can often help level the playing field for students who have limited access to books outside of the classroom," (Hunter, n.d., p. 37). In this way the classroom library serves as a central literature collection that all students have access to and can interact with on a daily basis.

A classroom library however is limited to the literature that a teacher has purchased for his or herself, inherited throughout their years of teaching or personally acquired through other venues. It has often been said that the more students read the more they learn and the more they develop a love for reading. Phyllis Hunter explains that students who have direct daily access to books are more likely to choose reading as a personal past time. In fact, research demonstrates that students in classrooms with a diverse classroom collection of appealing books read 50 percent more than

students who do not have access to a classroom library, (Hunter, n.d., p. 47). Naturally a novice teacher's classroom collection will be less developed than the classroom library of a veteran teacher. Nonetheless, a good classroom library of any size "supports, enhances, and elevates all students," by equipping the classroom with books that are always on hand, (Hunter, n.d., p. 72). The size of the classroom literature collection is important, but what is more imperative is the diversity of texts on the classroom library shelves. Building a diverse classroom library collection begins with each teacher and the books that they have at their disposal.

Whiteness of Children's Literature

Children's literature is one of the largest publishing markets that is constantly churning out classic favorites along with up and coming titles that are lining the shelves and filling the hearts of students and adults alike. New and old book titles continue to be published every year in a wide variety of genres such as fantasy, mystery, realistic fiction, and nonfiction and in innovative formats, such as the increasingly popular graphic novel or wordless picture book. However, based upon current research and children's book studies one thing is overwhelmingly true: the majority of children's books published each year are about white children. In fact, in 2012 the Cooperating Children's Book Center reviewed the diversity among 3,600 children's books and found that only 3% of the books were about African Americans, 1.5% were about Latinos, 2% were about Asian Pacific Americans and less than 1% of the books reviewed were about Native Americans. Thus meaning that of the 3,600 books reviewed 93% of the books were about Caucasian characters, (Kulger, 2012). This information is also displayed in Tina Kulger's graphic illustration, which can be found in Appendix A. While books about Caucasian characters are important and valuable to our children and students, books depicting stories and experiences from other diverse cultures are just as crucial. However, the current children's literature that is being published and put on the market does not seem to reflect this need.

According to Jane M. Gangi, what teachers typically consider to be “quality” children’s literature are primarily books that privilege “White people,” (Gangi, 2008, p. 30). In her writings Gangi refers to this fact as the “whiteness of children’s literature” and this can easily be seen in the low percentages of diverse children’s books published in 2012. In her article *The Unbearable Whiteness of Literacy Instruction: Realizing the Implications of the Proficient Reader Research* Gangi explains that the books she found to be most often featured on booklists, in book fairs, through prestigious awards, in literacy textbooks, on classroom shelves and even on students’ lists of “favorite books” are overwhelmingly white, (Gangi, 2008). While these children’s literature selections are most often quality books, they are not the only quality books available. However, in the children’s book market, large distributors such as Scholastic most often carry more books in which Caucasian children can more easily identify than those titles that are about diverse cultures and experiences.

In her research, Jane Gangi explores the fact that books about white children are more readily available for purchase. She states, “While Scholastic publishes many wonderful multicultural books, it is not necessarily these books that end up in the book fairs, of which Scholastic has a near monopoly, and on book order forms,” (Gangi, 2008, p. 31). Therefore, using the Scholastic publishing company as an example, multicultural books exist but they are not as easily available to teachers as the predominantly Caucasian books that are showcased in both book fairs and book orders. Subsequently, if teachers cannot easily obtain books about different cultures, experiences and lifestyles then such books are less likely to appear in classroom libraries, resulting in students not engaging with these types of texts as often. Thus, the pervading “whiteness of children’s literature” ultimately has a negative effect on novice, developing and proficient readers who are both Caucasian and culturally diverse. Gangi echoes this idea with her statement, “Since children must be able to make connections with what they read to become proficient readers, White

children, whose experiences are depicted in books can make more text-to-self, text-to-text and text-to-world connections than can children of color.” (Gangi, 2008, p. 33). Without multicultural literature, the connections culturally diverse readers make with books are not as deep as they would be if the books had characters that were indicative of other cultures and experiences with which they can connect.

Multicultural Children’s Literature Defined

Teachers, professors, librarians and researchers, have defined multicultural children’s literature in many different ways, but there is a general consensus among the literature and research. Two different definitions of multicultural literature, one by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center and another by Lara L. Hillard a Kindergarten teacher, appropriately summarize the different understandings. The Cooperative Children’s Book Center describes multicultural children’s literature as, “Books by and about people of color: African and African Americans, American Indians, Asian/Pacific and Asian Pacific Americans, and Latinos,” (Cooperative Children’s Book Center). Lara Hillard an elementary teacher in Arkansas, described multicultural children’s literature in the journal *The Reading Teacher* as literature that, “Emphasizes respect for different historical perspectives and cultures in human society,” (Hillard, 1995, p. 1). While one definition focuses specifically on cultural differences, the other definition is a bit more general and encompasses a broader sense of perspective in human society.

One name that sticks out in the world of multicultural children’s literature, specifically African American children’s literature, is Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop. Dr. Bishop was a professor of Education at the Ohio State University and has devised an insightful and amply quoted metaphor that describes the value and importance of multicultural children’s literature. In a 1990 article Dr. Bishop wrote for the journal *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom* in which she describes multicultural children’s literature, and books in general, she describes children’s

literature as having three different purposes for diverse students. She states, “Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author,” (Bishop, 1990, p. 1). Here she describes books as either windows or sliding glass doors. Books that appear to be “window books” are those in which students are introduced to another experience, situation, life view or culture that is different than their own, and through the text they are able to peer in and get a feel for any enigmatic differences. While “sliding glass door books” are pieces of literature that allow for students to figuratively open the door and step into the world the author has constructed. In her article Dr. Bishop then goes on to describe the most personal type of window book a reader can engage with, “When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror,” (Bishop, 1990, p. 1). From her research on literature Dr. Bishop explains that literature is not only a tool for knowledge and communication, but rather, it functions as a means of transforming the human experience and reflecting it back on the reader. In these reflections readers can often see their own lives and ideals reflected, and through this reading experience they are better able to form the deep connections with literature that are required of skillful readers.

Importance of Multicultural Children’s Literature

Proficient readers interact and engage with books by making connections to their own lives, personal experiences, other texts, and even historical and current events occurring in the world around them; connections sometimes referred to as text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world. These types of connections allow students to work to comprehend what they read at deeper levels and practice reading both within and beyond a text. In order to make these deep connections students must be able to connect with books that they are reading.

“According to the latest census...close to 50 percent of the country’s children combined are of African American, Hispanic, American Indian, or Asian American heritage,” (as cited in Strauss, 2014, p. 2). With that being said half of our nation’s children are not of European American heritage. Classroom communities are continuing to grow in diversity and it is the job of teachers to model that diversity in their literature selections for both culturally diverse and Caucasian students. Connections with books help students to create their individual and global identities and the deeper and more personal the connections the more beneficial the reading experience is to children. Picture books have long taught students life lessons with positive themes such as kindness, tolerance, respect, friendship and courage. As well, picture books have a keen ability to take emotionally charged topics such as segregation, prejudice, discrimination, mental illness, disability, and bullying and craft tales that provide truthful information to students in a developmentally appropriate way. Multicultural children’s books accomplish similar tasks by introducing students of all ages to diverse cultures and experiences that they may have not been exposed to otherwise. Children who belong to the dominant social groups do not often have a difficult time finding literature with which they can connect. However, they do have a difficult time interacting with multicultural books because their exposure to them is typically minimal. In fact, according to Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop,

“Children from dominant social groups have always found their mirrors in books, but they, too, have suffered from the lack of availability of books about others. They need the books as windows onto reality, not just on imaginary worlds. They need books that will help them understand the multicultural nature of the world they live in, and their place as a member of just one group, as well as their connections to all other humans.” (Bishop, 1990, p. 2).

For these reasons students who are members of majority social groups need to interact with multicultural books so they can develop a better understanding and appreciation of the world and cultures around them.

In addition, students of diverse cultural backgrounds whose identities and experiences are reinforced and celebrated in multicultural books benefit by growing in personal and cultural understanding. Often students of diverse cultural backgrounds rarely pick up a book that has their face on it; meaning a character that looks like, thinks like and experiences the world like they do. These books help students to begin to understand themselves and help them to work to understand how they fit within larger society. Writer, author, and scholar of multicultural children's literature, Daphne Muse, summarizes this idea in an interview for Southern Poverty Law Center's magazine website "Teaching Tolerance". Muse states, "Seeing your own experience affirmed in literature gives you tools for understanding what's beyond your world." (Southern Poverty Law Center, 1999, p. 1). Therefore, multicultural literature functions as a tool for culturally diverse students to understand their own world, but also as a tool for students of all races, ethnicities and backgrounds to learn about, understand and appreciate the different voices and experiences of the diverse cultures that work together to create our world.

RATIONALE OF STUDY

Classroom libraries are an important piece of the elementary classroom environment. Students typically visit the school library once a week, and many do not have unlimited access to the library. The classroom library is a place where students can have constant access to books of all levels, genres, and those that portray characters of varying cultures and backgrounds. Students are able to see books with "their" face on it directly in their classroom environment. As well, students respect and value the opinion of the teacher and the books that they put on their shelves, so students are more likely to be drawn to books that teachers are passionate about and promote. For this reason, the books included in a classroom library are highly influential for developing readers. Teachers have the power to fill their libraries with books of their choosing and their classroom library choices inevitably become the choices of their students.

As aforementioned, it is important for *all* children to have access to multicultural books in their classrooms. All students have and are developing their own identities that are specific to their beliefs, life experiences, or future dreams, and the books that they are presented with can have positive or negative effects. Multicultural books allow students to interact with characters that parallel their own identities but also engage with those characters that represent and embody the identities of others who take part in the larger world around them. Multicultural children's literature is deserving of a place in the classroom libraries of all elementary teachers regardless of the racial makeup of their students. All students of any race, color, or cultural experience benefit from multicultural children's literature that is indicative of their own culture but also that of their classmates and fellow students across the globe. Multicultural books help readers to create a balanced worldview and show students that their understanding of the world is not the only understanding. Students should be exposed to their own culture through books that mirror their experiences but also to other cultures through books that allow them to view and enter into different realities.

Through the stated research, it is easy to see that multicultural children's literature is deemed important and is believed to deserve a place in the classroom library. However, this study sought to discover to what extent Indiana elementary teachers shared the same beliefs. The goal of this research study was to explore the perceptions of multicultural children's literature that experts in the field had to offer: the teachers who are interacting with their classroom libraries and students on a daily basis. It aims to develop an understanding of the opinions that general education classroom teachers have about multicultural children's literature and its inclusion in their classroom library. The ultimate goal was to see to what extent multicultural books were present in elementary classrooms and the viewpoints that a variety of Elementary teachers, in grades K-6, had for multicultural literature.

The classroom library is unique to every teacher. This study aimed to gain a sense as to how Indiana teachers are currently interacting and implementing multicultural literature in their classrooms with their students. What factors do teachers consider when selecting books for their classroom library? What do they *define* as multicultural children's literature? What cultures are represented in their library? How do they rate the current quality of their library, and are they seeking to improve it? All these questions were considered in this study to develop understandings of teacher's perceptions and attitudes about multicultural children's literature.

METHODS

To develop a knowledge base of the field of study of both multicultural children's literature and elementary classroom libraries I conducted research using academic literature. I consulted works by experts in multicultural children's literature and synthesized the arguments made by varied sources to develop a foundation for this research study. To gather explicit research on classroom libraries and teacher's perceptions of the importance of multicultural children's literature, as principal investigator, I designed a digital survey (see Appendix B) that facilitates personal reflection from current practicing teachers. The purpose of the survey was to gain insight from a teacher's perspective about the design and contents of their personal classroom libraries. Before research was initiated, Instructional Review Board exempt approval was obtained in October of 2014 through Ball State University's branch of IRB, with the package name of Classroom Libraries (#668605-1). All Ball State University IRB documents pertaining to the classroom library survey can be found in Appendix D at the end of the document. The survey does not pose any harm to participants.

The teachers who participated in the survey were all current elementary educators in the state of Indiana, teaching in grades kindergarten – sixth, who were between the ages of twenty-one and sixty. The study focused on the need for diverse children's literature in the elementary

classroom library. The parameters of research for this study were set to only include K-6 elementary teachers in order to focus on the perceptions of educators who are currently teaching students at the most progressive periods where their reading skills are initially developing and being practiced. As well, the state in which a teacher teaches may influence the view and perceived importance of multicultural children's literature, so this variable was also kept constant in the research study. For these reasons, classroom teachers who are not currently employed at an Indiana Elementary School were not permitted to participate in the survey, because their perceptions may be different than a practicing teacher.

To facilitate timely responses and a diverse scope of teacher participants I created the survey using digital Qualtrics software. The digital survey was sent out via email to schools in the Professional Development Schools Directory of Ball State University. The survey was preceded by a teacher information letter (see Appendix C), which briefly explained the design and purpose of the classroom library research study. Participation in the research survey was completely voluntary and no compensation was given to participants. In order to receive as many survey responses as possible, teachers who received the survey were encouraged to send the information letter and survey link to other Indiana classroom teachers they had connections with.

For research purposes multicultural literature was defined as any book that presents characters or content that is indicative and representative of a culture other than the majority European American culture. The entire survey was comprised of twenty-three questions of varying formats, including multiple choice, open response, and scaled answers. The survey is estimated to take approximately fifteen minutes to complete. The survey (see Appendix B) probes teachers about general information about their teaching careers, their opinion of their current classroom library, the ways in which they most often acquire books for their library, qualities they search for and deem most important in children's literature, and their opinion on the importance of multicultural

children's literature as defined by the principal investigator. Both qualitative and quantitative data were elicited through the survey. Teachers were prompted to estimate the number of books in their classroom library, the monetary amount they spend on books for their classroom library each year, the amount of money their schools provide them for classroom books each year, their age, number of years they have taught, an approximate number of multicultural books in their classroom library, the racial distribution of their school, and the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch. Qualitative data included teacher's opinions on the quality of their classroom libraries, the name of one multicultural children's literature title in their classroom, their race, highest level of education, and their perception of multicultural children's literature. To collect data about the socioeconomic status of the families in the schools in which the participating teachers teach the website <http://projects.propublica.org/schools/states/in> was used to provide individual school information.

To respect and protect the privacy of all participants the survey data was kept confidential. No personal identifying factors, such as the contributor's name or school district, were supplied to the principal investigator. All survey results were linked to the principal investigator's Qualtrics survey account and made available digitally to the principal investigator and research sponsor.

As a researcher, I could have elected to complete systematic observation on my own by entering Indiana elementary classrooms to analyze and critique classroom libraries from my own definition and multicultural ideal. However, the goal of my thesis is to explore the multicultural perspectives that teachers have and how they themselves view, promote and exhibit multicultural literature in their classroom library. The best responses and personal reflection come from the teachers themselves, who are currently invested in dynamic daily literacy instruction.

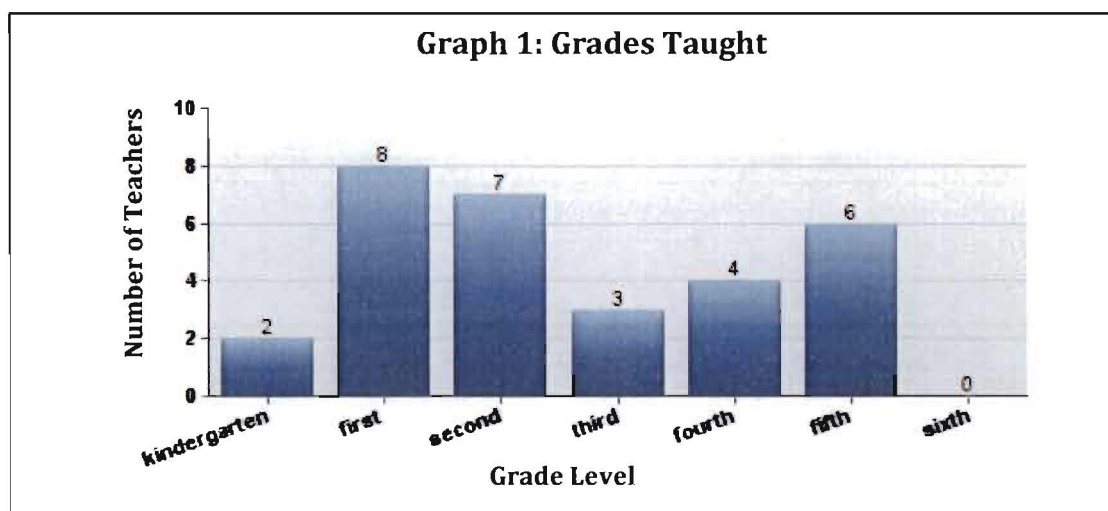
RESULTS AND DATA

A total of thirty Indiana elementary teachers in grades K-5 completed the digital Classroom Library survey. All respondents were Caucasian females with 27% of those surveyed being between the ages of 22-30, 33% were between the ages of 31-40, 27% were between the ages of 41-50 and 13% of those surveyed were between the ages of 51-60. Of the teachers surveyed 40% indicated that the highest level of education they had obtained was a Bachelor's degree and the remaining 60% had earned a Master's degree. The total years of experience of the respondents were varied with 20% having taught between 1-4 years, 20% teaching between 5-10 years, 33% between 11-15 years 7% between 16-20 years and finally a total of 20% of the teachers surveyed have taught for more than 20 years. Of the teachers surveyed 57% taught in the primary elementary grades of kindergarten-second and the remaining 43% of teachers surveyed taught upper elementary grades of third-fifth. For the exact number of teachers surveyed in each grade level see Graph 1 on page 18.

The socioeconomic statuses of the schools in which the surveyed teachers taught ranged from low to upper, with a median of schools being in the middle SES range. Of those who reported 27% indicated that 70%-100% of students in their school receive free or reduced lunch, 47% indicated 40%-69% of students receive free or reduced lunch, and 27% of teachers surveyed indicated 10%-39% of students in their school receive free or reduced lunch. Teachers were asked to categorize their school as rural, urban or suburban and of those surveyed 33% work in an urban school, 23% work in a rural school and the remaining 43% work in a suburban school environment. Therefore the average teacher participant in the classroom library survey was a Caucasian female teaching in a low-to-middle SES school in a suburban area.

For the purposes of this study, a classroom library was defined as the collection of books available to students within the classroom. However, a classroom library does **not** include books available in the school library. Participating teachers were asked to rate the quality of their

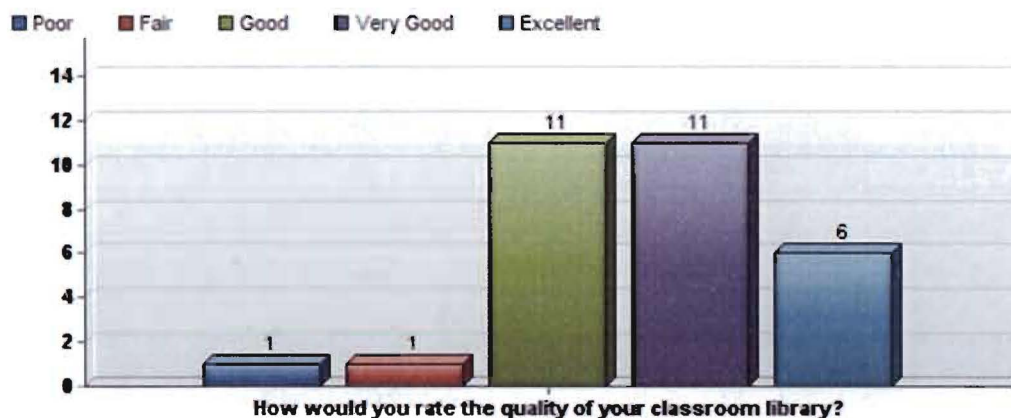
classroom libraries at the very beginning and end of the survey. At the beginning, out of 30 teachers who reported, a total of twenty-two teachers would describe their classroom library as being very good, or good. While six would describe their classroom library as being excellent, and the remaining two teachers rated their libraries as fair or poor. The exact number of teachers in each rating category can be found in Graph 2 on page 19. While at the end of the survey, of the twenty-nine teachers who reported, only three rated their classroom library as excellent, and eighteen described their library as good or very good. However, at the end of the survey a total of eight teachers now rated their classroom libraries as either fair or poor. The exact number of teachers who indicated each rating can be seen in Graph 3 on page 19.



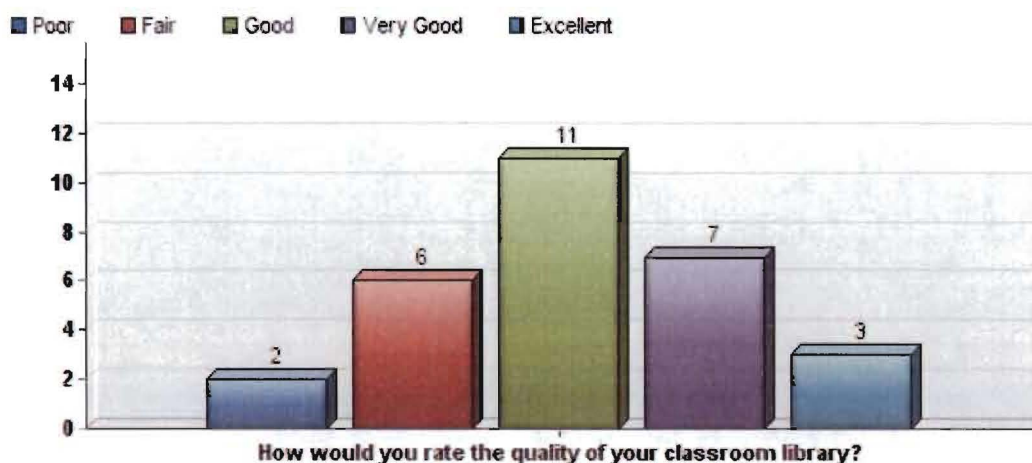
When asked how often their students utilize the classroom library half of the thirty participants reported that students used the library multiple times per day, but the average classroom library usage was determined to be between several times per week and once per day. A graph of the results indicating the level of usage of each classroom library can be seen in Graph 4 on page 20. Participants were asked to approximate the number of books currently in their classroom library. There were three outliers in the data set that maxed out the number of books in their classroom library at 1000 books, so these two participants were not included in the calculated average. The

average number of books in the classroom library of all elementary teachers who reported was approximately 390 books. On average, primary teacher participants in grades K-2 had approximately 376 books in their classroom library, while intermediate teachers in grades 3-5 had an average of 415 books in their classroom libraries.

Graph 2: Classroom Library Rating Beginning of Survey



Graph 3: Classroom Library Rating End of Survey



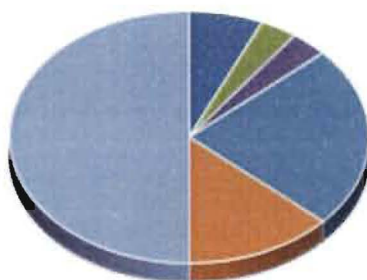
Given the following definition, “multicultural children's literature is defined as any children’s book that presents characters or content that represents a culture other than the majority

European American culture,” the survey participants were asked to estimate the percentage of books in their classroom library that were considered to be multicultural. Of those who reported the average estimated percentage of multicultural books in the classroom library was 20.9%. Of primary teacher participants the estimated percentage of multicultural classroom library books was 17.8% and the approximate percentage for intermediate teachers was 26.3% of all the books in their classroom library.

Graph 4: Estimated Student Usage of Classroom Libraries

■ Less Than Once Per Month ■ Once Per Month ■ Several Times Per Month ■ Once Per Week
 ■ Several Times Per Week ■ Once Per Day ■ Multiple Times Per Day

How often do your students use your classroom library?



In the Classroom Library survey teachers were questioned about their perceptions of multicultural children’s literature including *how* important they believe it is for multicultural books to be included in their classroom library, followed with explanations in their own words as to *why* they believe it is important to include multicultural children’s literature in their classroom library. Of the twenty-nine participants who reported approximately 55% believe multicultural children’s literature is important in the classroom library, and approximately 20.6% believe multicultural literature is extremely important. To view the perspectives of the remaining participants see Table 1 on the following page. Participants were prompted to provide their own short responses to the question, “Why do you believe it is important to include multicultural children's literature in your

classroom library?” Many responses included developed understandings about the importance of multicultural children’s literature in the classroom library. Some of the comments were as follows:

- “I think it’s important for students to be exposed to a variety of cultures, especially those that differ from their own. It’s necessary to present students with an alternative perspective.”
- “I think is it important for children to “see themselves” within a story. So when you have a variety of characters in your stories, it’s easy to reach all cultures within your class.”
- “I have children from all over in my classroom. I want to know that they can find and read about places/things that are relevant to them and know other kids exist like them elsewhere.”
- “Not everyone is “white” in today’s classroom. Children want to read books that reflect who they are.”
- “Students need to be exposed to different cultures to be part of a global community.”
- “To express multiple viewpoints and encourage a multicultural learning environment.”
- “Our diverse culture needs to be explored and integrated into the classroom. Children may not get exposure outside of school.”

Table 1: Importance of Multicultural Literature

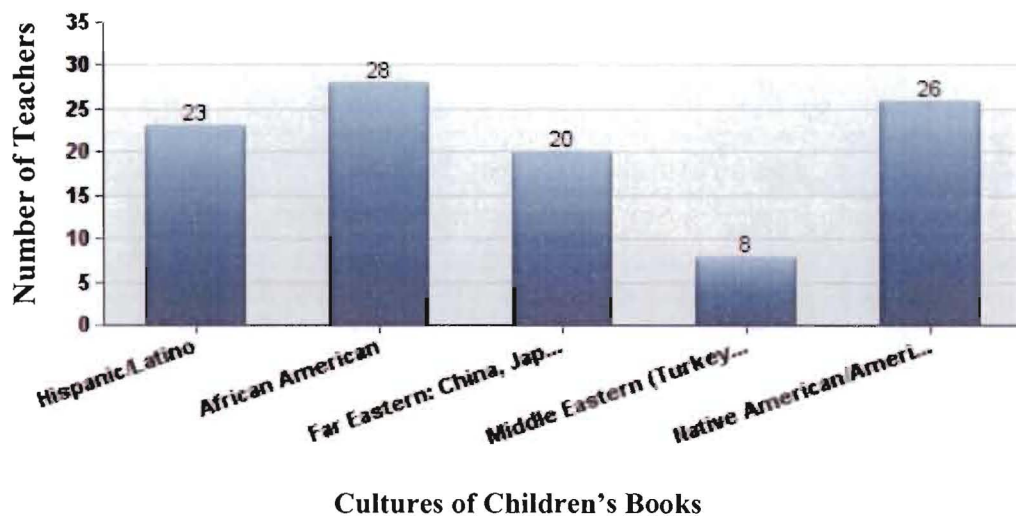
Question	Not At All Important	Not Very Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Extremely Important	Total Responses
How important is it for you to include multicultural children's literature in your classroom library?	1	1	5	16	6	29

Teachers were then asked to consider the texts that they have available in their classroom library and indicate whether or not that had at least one book from any of the following cultures:

1. Hispanic/Latino
2. African American
3. Far Eastern: China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia
4. Middle Eastern (Turkey, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Israel, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, Libya, and Arabian)
5. Native American/American Indian

African American culture was that which was most represented in the classroom libraries of those surveyed, with 97% of participants indicating that they had at least one African American children's book. Native American/American Indian multicultural children's books were also highly represented with 90% of participants having at least one such book, followed by 79% of participants having at least one Hispanic/Latino text, 69% indicated they had at least one book about Far Eastern cultures, and 28% have at least one Middle Eastern cultural book in their classroom library. Graph 5 below shows the amount of teachers having each type of multicultural children's literature in their classroom library.

Graph 5: Cultures Represented in Classroom Libraries



DISCUSSION

The survey findings show that on average intermediate teachers in grades 3-5 have approximately 40 more books in their classroom libraries than do primary teachers in grades K-2. However, when looking at individual data points seven primary teachers indicated that they had more books in their classroom library than the average number of books in an intermediate teacher's library. When asked what percentage of their classroom libraries are multicultural, on average intermediate teachers indicated they had approximately 8.6% more of their library being multicultural children's literature than their primary counterparts. Of those who reported on the aforementioned data, there were seventeen primary teachers and only 11 intermediate teachers. The greater amount of data values for the primary teachers could have decreased the average values, but from the data collected, it is inconclusive whether or not primary or intermediate teachers have more multicultural books in their classroom libraries.

When comparing the responses reported from teachers who teach in urban, suburban, and rural schools the percentage of multicultural children's books in classroom libraries differed. In urban schools the average percentage of the multicultural books in classroom libraries was approximately 21%, the average percentage for suburban teachers was 19%, and the average percentage of multicultural books for rural teachers was approximately 15%. The amount of multicultural children's literature in each school could be indicative of the diversity of the student population in each school, with urban schools being most diverse and rural schools being the least diverse. The urban teachers indicated that on average approximately 44.8% of students were Caucasian with the remaining students being of another race, in suburban schools the average percentage of that student population that is Caucasian was 62.5%, while in rural schools the average percentage of Caucasian students was approximately 92.3%. From the data it is shown that urban schools tend to be the most diverse, suburban schools are somewhat diverse, and rural schools

have the lowest percentage of diverse students. This shows that there is a correlation between teachers providing multicultural books in their classroom libraries and the percentage of their students who are from diverse cultures. While having a classroom library that parallels the classroom student population is important, as shown by research Caucasian students still greatly benefit and need multicultural children's literature.

The results of the study support the idea that multicultural children's literature is important in the classroom library, and that teachers from primary and intermediate as well as urban, rural and suburban backgrounds agree with this perception. As evidenced by the data collected from the research survey Indiana elementary education students, on average, visit their classroom library multiple times a day to select books to view and read. This shows that classroom libraries are indeed an important and dynamic feature in elementary classrooms and Indiana students utilize them as a tool and resource. This indicates that the classroom library would be a strategic location to include multicultural children's literature because it is a central location to which all students have access.

The research study demonstrated that Indiana elementary teachers believe that multicultural books are important to include in their classroom library. This is evidenced by their personal comments about the importance of multicultural literature and their indication of the cultures represented in their classroom libraries. It was found that the African American culture is the predominant cultural experience featured in classroom literature, but that elementary educators indicated they also had a few titles supporting other cultures. These data show that while teachers believe multicultural books are important, their classroom libraries could be increased to include additional multicultural books representing other diverse cultures around the world. It is important for teachers to remember that the cultures of their specific students need not be the only cultures represented in classroom literature. All students benefit from multicultural books from a wide array

of cultures and experiences, and it is important for teachers to establish as diverse of a classroom literature collection as possible.

Finally, it is important to note that in the survey the overall rating of their classroom library changed for a number of teachers from the beginning of the survey to the end of the survey. The same question was asked at the start of the survey and the culmination to see if teachers' ratings of their classroom library changed after reflecting upon the definition and incidence of multicultural children's books within their classroom. At the beginning of the survey the majority of participating teachers described their library as very good, but after taking the survey and reflecting upon other questions there was a general decrease in teacher's perceptions of their libraries. This shows that this survey alone encouraged teachers to reflect upon their inclusion of multicultural children's literature in their libraries and challenged them to evaluate their opinions and understandings of such literature. This provides evidence that Indiana elementary teachers are actively evaluating their classroom libraries and working towards building a diverse classroom collection.

IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH

With the knowledge that the classroom library is the most accessible location for elementary literature it is imperative that these collections be home to a diverse selection of genres, reading levels, and cultural representations. The world of children's literature is often saturated with predominantly Caucasian characters. While these characters and the books they exist within are quality literature and valuable additions to classroom libraries, they cannot be the only titles available to students. Students need multicultural children's literature that provides both mirrors into their own cultural world but also windows into the understanding of the cultures of their peers inside and outside the classroom. To be able to build a personal and global identity students need to be introduced to diverse cultural perspectives from the elementary age. According to Jane Gangi it

is not only about cultural identity but it is also about reaching all students and developing successful readers, (Strauss, 2014, p. 3). In a 2014 article in *The Washington Post* Gangi stated, “If we want all children to become proficient readers, we must stock classrooms with mirror books for all children. This change in our classroom libraries will also allow children of the dominant culture to see literature about others who look different and live differently,” (Strauss, 2014, p. 3). In this way multicultural children’s literature reaches all children so there are few drawbacks for its inclusion in classroom libraries but rather ample educational and personal benefits.

It is my recommendation that when teachers are actively seeking out books to add to their classroom library collection that they consciously consider multicultural children’s literature titles when making their selections. As well, when reflecting upon their current classroom library teachers need to consider the cultures that are represented in their collections. One way teachers can expand their multicultural literature collections is by seeking out smaller independent book distributors that offer a varied selection of literature that presents an array of strong characters representing diverse cultural experiences. As well, teachers can research and explicitly seek out quality multicultural book titles to bolster a culture that may be lacking in their classroom library. Reviews, summaries and recommendations of multicultural books are widely available in teaching textbooks, magazines, academic journals and across the Internet. Novice and veteran teachers alike can use these tools to discover and explore multicultural children’s literature titles as they consider their inclusion in their classroom library.

CONCLUSION

Reading is an imperative skill, and quality children’s literature is a tool that can help students go from proficient and fluent readers to passionate critical thinkers who read books not only to learn, but for genuine enjoyment. In order for students to build reading comprehension skills they must learn how to read within a text as well as beyond the text to make connections to self,

other texts, and the world. However, during the primary and intermediate grades students are just beginning to learn and practice the skills of connection and close reading. Therefore, early readers benefit most from texts that present characters indicative of their own experiences and understandings. No student has the exact same learning style, and in the same way no student has the exact same cultural understanding. Students approach books in different ways, and multicultural children's books can help bridge the cultural gap. Multicultural children's literature brings characters and stories indicative of an array of cultural experiences and helps both cultural minority and majority students grow and develop their own unique cultural identity.

Teachers are the first responders for elementary readers, and they are one of the biggest influences when it comes to the books their students choose. Young readers place a lot of stock in their teacher's opinion. It is therefore the job of the elementary teacher to expose his or her students to a wide selection of books that broaden their worldview. As one teacher stated in response to the classroom library survey, "Young children need to be exposed to multicultural literature so that they can begin to see a life beyond what they know." No cultural experience is the only experience and elementary students need to begin to establish confidence in their own identity but also realize that their world is not the only world. Elementary teachers can not only aid in the attainment of reading comprehension, but with the use of multicultural children's literature in their classroom libraries they can lay the foundation for a strong sense of cultural respect in their students.

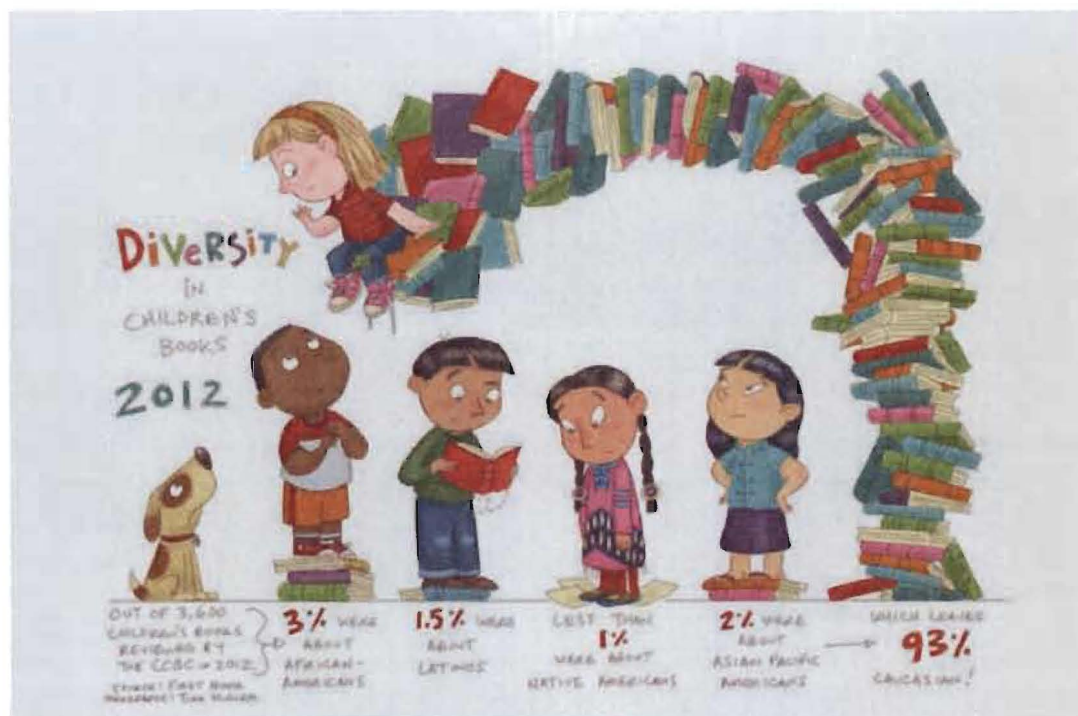
References

- Bishop, R. S. , (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom. Vo. 6, no. 3. The Ohio State University*. Retrieved from: <http://www.rif.org/us/literacy-resources/multicultural/mirrors-windows-and-sliding-glass-doors.htm>
- Cooperative Children's Book Center. (n.d.). *Multicultural literature*. Retrieved from <http://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/multicultural.asp>
- Fractor, J.S. , Matrinez, M. G. , Teale, W. H. , & Woodruff, M. C. (1993). Let's not miss opportunities to promote voluntary reading: Classroom libraries in the elementary school. *The Reading Teacher*. 46(6), 476-484.
- Gangi, J.M. (2008). The unbearable whiteness of literacy instruction: Realizing the implications of the proficient reader research. *Multicultural Review*. Retrieved from: nyliteracy.wikispaces.com/fil/view/gangi-unbearable.pdf
- Hillard, L. L., (1995). Defining the “multi-“ in “multicultural” through children's literature. *The Reading Teacher*. 48(8), 728-729.
- Hunter, P.C. (n.d.). Classroom libraries: Level the playing field. *Scholastic Instructor*, 37-40, 71-72.
- Indiana Department of Education (2011). *Indiana K-6 reading framework: Instruction*. Retrieved from <http://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/curriculum/reading-framework-preface1.pdf>
- Kulger, T. Cooperating Children's Book Center. (2012). [Graph illustration of diversity in children's books for 2012]. Retrieved from <http://readingpartners.org/blog/discussing-diversity-in-childrens-literature/>
- ProPublica. (2010). *Educational access in Indiana*. Retrieved from: <http://projects.propublica.org/schools/states/in>

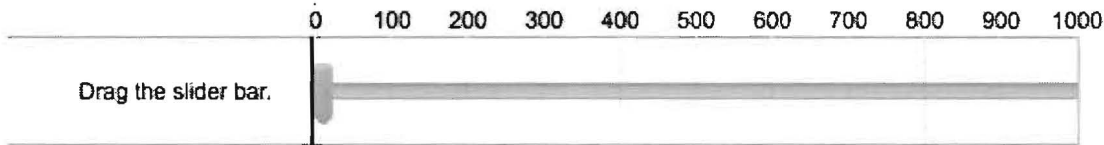
Southern Poverty Law Center (1999). New voices, new vision. *Teaching Tolerance*, 15. Retrieved from: <http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-15-spring-1999/feature/new-voices-new-visions>

Strauss, V. (2014, September 16). How common core's recommended books fail children of color. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/>

Appendix A: Tina Kulger's Diversity of Children's Literature Graphic



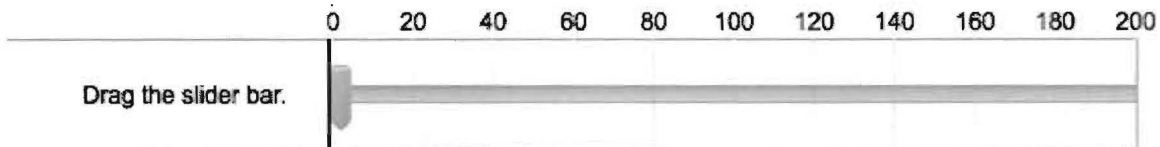
Q5 Approximately how many books are in your classroom library?



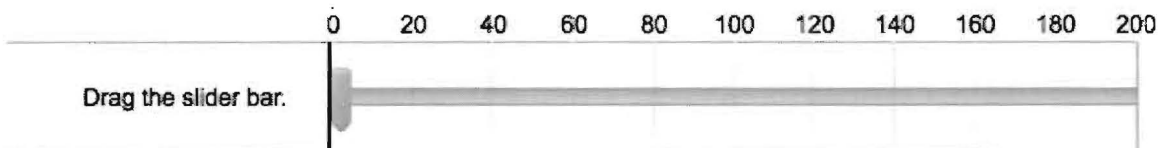
Q6 Please rank order the sources of the books in your classroom library. For example, drag "Gifts from Family and Friends" to the top spot if that is the source of the majority of your books. Click and drag the items up and down to rank them.

- _____ Garage Sales
- _____ Library Used Book Sales
- _____ Gifts from friends and family
- _____ Scholastic Book Fairs (using my own money)
- _____ Scholastic Book Club Flyers (using my own money)
- _____ Scholastic Book Club Flyers Bonus Points
- _____ Bookstores (using my own money)
- _____ Scholastic Book Fairs (donations from parents, PTO, etc.)
- _____ Inherited books from other teachers
- _____ Donations from parents
- _____ School PTO funds
- _____ Other (Please describe)

Q7 Approximately how much of your own money (in dollars) do you spend on books for your classroom library per year?

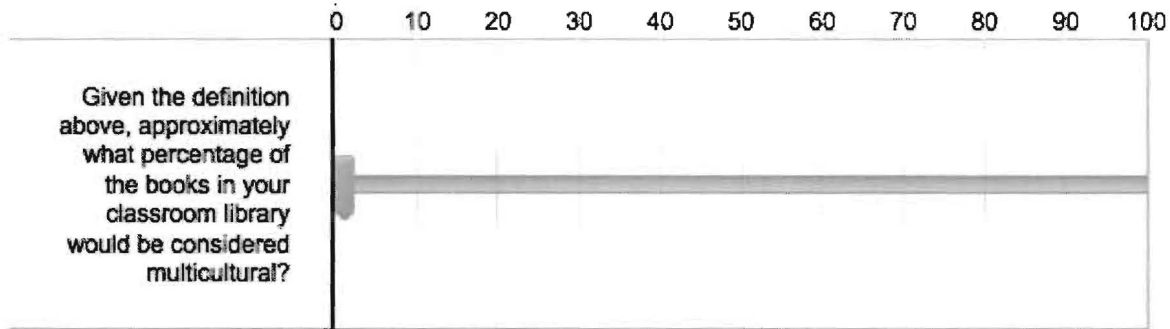


Q8 Approximately how much money (in dollars) are you given by your school or PTO per year to spend on books for your classroom library?



Q9 As you are considering new books to add to your classroom library, what factors do you take into consideration? That is, what are the characteristics that you are looking for in books that are new for your library? For example, you might be looking for books with female characters in them. You might be looking for non-fiction books.

Q10 For the purposes of this study, multicultural children's literature is defined as any children's book that presents characters or content that represents a culture other than the majority European American culture.



Q11 Please select an answer.

	Not At All Important (1)	Not Very Important (2)	Somewhat Important (3)	Important (4)	Extremely Important (5)
How important is it for you to include multicultural children's literature in your classroom library? (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q12 Why do you believe it is important to include multicultural children's literature in your classroom library?

Q13 Name one multicultural children's literature title in your classroom library.

Q14 Complete the following sentence: I have at least one book in my classroom portraying _____ culture. Mark all that apply.

- ☐ Hispanic/Latino
- ☐ African American
- ☐ Far Eastern: China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia
- ☐ Middle Eastern (Turkey, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Israel, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, Libya, and Arabian)
- ☐ Native American/American Indian
- ☐ Other (Please describe) _____

Q15 Now that you have completed the survey, please answer this question again.

	Poor (1)	Fair (2)	Good (3)	Very Good (4)	Excellent (5)
How would you rate the quality of your classroom library? (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q16 Indicate what percentage of students your school has of each race. You can find this information by clicking [here](#) and then typing in the name of your school. The web site will pop up in a new window. You can get back to the survey by closing the new window. If the pop-up does not work for you, you can copy and paste this address into another window.

<http://projects.propublica.org/schools/states/in>

African-American/Black

Asian

Hispanic

Native American/American Indian

White/Caucasian

Q17 How would you categorize your school?

- ☐ Urban
- ☐ Rural
- ☐ Suburban

Q18 Indicate the socioeconomic status of the families from which your students come. You can find this information by clicking [here](#) and then typing in the name of your school. The web site will pop up in a new window. You can get back to the survey by closing the new window. If the pop-up does not work for you, you can copy and paste this address into another window.

<http://projects.propublica.org/schools/states/in>

- ☐ 70%-100% of students receive free and reduced lunch
- ☐ 40%-69% of students receive free and reduced lunch
- ☐ 10%-39% of students receive free and reduced lunch
- ☐ 0%-9% of students receive free and reduced lunch

Q19 Indicate your highest degree earned. If you are working on a degree, indicate the highest degree already completed.

- ☐ Bachelor's Degree
- ☐ Master's Degree
- ☐ Doctorate Degree
- ☐ Specialist's Degree

Q20 How many years have you been teaching?

- ☐ 1-4
- ☐ 5-10
- ☐ 11-15
- ☐ 16-20
- ☐ 20+

Q21 Identify your ethnicity. You may select more than one category.

- ☐ White/Caucasian
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ African-American
- ☐ Hispanic/Latino/Spanish Origin
- ☐ American Indian/Alaska Native
- ☐ Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander

Q22 What is your age?

- ☐ 22-30
- ☐ 31-40
- ☐ 41-50
- ☐ 51-60
- ☐ 61+

Q23 What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female